viewpoint of ethnographic research, text similarities do not mean very much, and idioms that are not fixed by writing may, within a few centuries, become deformed to the extent of being unrecognizable. While the value of grammatical comparisons is much more important, we have unfortunately had neither the time nor the means to make use of this method. We will, therefore, merely indicate this point of view which, in our opinion, could lead to fruitful observations. On the other hand, missionaries have claimed that the Mossi traditionally would have preserved the symbolic notion of the Christian cross, a fact we have been unable to verify and which, without being impossible a priori, seems unlikely."

After this parenthesis about the distant origins of the Mossi, Captain Lambert continues:

"It is indeed highly probable, and here again, lacking written documents, we have only oral traditions to base our opinions on, that the Mossi people, split up by the impact of a Moslem invasion from the east, must have, through successive waves and losing ground in the opposite direction, spread further toward the west, so that the Mossi-bé (1), who still form several agglomerations in the western

1. Mossi-bé is simply the plural of the word Mossi in Peuhle /Peul/ language.

part of Sokoto and even in the Dounzou circle and who also show striking analogies with the Mossi proper, can also be used as a reference. (Captain Lambert adds in a note: "Among the Mossi-bé we find the circumflex accent which would complete the ethnic tatooing of the Mossi as it is today. This mark rightly belongs to the natives of the left bank of the Niger river up to the angle formed by the Dollol-Maouri.") These agglomerations indicate, in a very approximate fashion, the location of the Mossi empire at the historical period that evidently marks its apogee of power; toward 1350, as we saw /4/ in the Tarikh, Timbuktu was conquered by the sultan of Mossi."

The incident to which Captain Lambert refers here is the conquest of Timbuktu by the Mossi (in 1333 exactly, according to the most advanced calculations) (1), which is mentioned by Es-Sadi in

11: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1964
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The district chief was relatively secure in the control of his territory as long as he maintained amicable relations with his immediate superiors and administered his district to their satisfaction. A less important but more constant source of concern was his relationship with neighboring chiefs. Many people who can remember the pre-conquest period say it was unsafe for a man to trespass into another district unless he was on an official mission from his chief to another chief. It appears that most of the fighting occurred over strayed cattle and stolen women, with constant raids and counter-raids. The cattle were eaten, and the women kept as wives. Captured men were sometimes sold as slaves, but more often were held for ransom. They were not kept as slaves, since the Mossi were forbidden to enslave other Mossi. Needless to say, this fighting was frowned upon by the Mogho Naba. Since all district chiefs believed in their common descent from Ouedraogo and Oubri and paid allegiance to the Mogho Naba, any fighting among them was not only a sin against the ancestors but also an act of disloyalty to the Mogho Naba. When (as was usually the case) this fighting was of short duration and few people were killed, the Mogho Naba took no official notice of it. But when it became serious, he sent the provincial administrator to stop the fighting and to summon the dissident elements to the capital for trial. The speed and severity with which the Mogho Naba dealt with quarrels within his own realm usually depended upon his strength. At some periods in Mossi history there was little internal disorder, because the rulers were strong; at other periods, under weak rulers, disorder practically amounted to internal chaos. During such periods, the Mossi were kept together only by the bonds of kinship and religion which united them against outsiders.

The district chief maintained tight control over his own territory and took an active part in its administration. In a district like Nobere, for example, the chief was aided both by an informal council and by an administrative apparatus similar to but smaller than the one at Ouagadougou. The council included men with whom the chief had grown up, members of his immediate family such as his brothers, and a few formal administrative personnel. These councillors visited him every day, brought him occasional gifts, received gifts from him in turn, and discussed informally all matters of interest. Yet, informal as this communication was, it enabled the district chief to know what was going on in his villages. Moreover, these councillors interceded for various villages and gave the chief valuable advice in administrative matters.

The formal administrative personnel of the district included a Ouidi Naba, a Baloum Naba, a Tansoba, and lesser officials with titles identical

gift every year to the Imam and to Karamakho Isa, for whom he has great veneration. These are old and wise men who cannot but give him excellent counsel.[18]

The relations between Boukary Koutou and the Moslems of the Sakhaboutenga district show how Mossi chiefs, though pagans, were able to establish viable political bonds with potentially hostile believers of another religion. Boukary Koutou was probably a Moslem "in outward appearance only," as Binger suggests. Nevertheless, it was by being Moslems of this kind that Mossi rulers managed to retain the allegiance of their Moslem subjects. This was their duty as "fathers of their people," and apparently they did it without much hesitation. In this manner, they effectively used religion to bolster their power and sustain their authority.

Ritual connections between the Mossi rulers and the chiefs of surrounding countries enabled them to protect their subjects from foreign attack and to maintain internal cohesion. The numerous reciprocal gifts between the Mossi and such other Voltaic groups as the Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Gurmanche were based on the belief in descent from a common ancestor or ancestress. Ritual and the supernatural thus played an extremely important role in the cohesiveness of the Mossi kingdoms and in the functioning of their governmental processes. Without these ritual factors, it is doubtful whether the Mossi rulers would have been able to maintain such a relatively high degree of control over their subjects, given the relative weakness of their economic resources, communications, and armed forces. In trying to understand why the Mossi retained their autonomy for so long, one must take into consideration the statement made by a French officer a year after the Mossi were conquered: "We must not lose sight of the fact that [the Mossi] have always presented a common front to strangers, and that a single word of command is sufficient to unite them against the invader in the name of kinship and national unity."[19]

The phase of Mossi political history that began when Nyennega left Dagomba and moved northward came to an end with the European conquest. Most French scholars believe that the Mossi were in a state of decadence at the time of conquest and might have fallen to such African conquerors as El Hadj Omar, Samory Touré, or Baba To. The fact remains, however, that these conquerors all skirted Mossi country without entering it. If these African rulers believed that the Mossi were invincible in their unity, it was because the Mossi, through mythical bonds of common descent and actual bonds of kinship, had welded themselves into a cohesive and powerful group.